

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET stories

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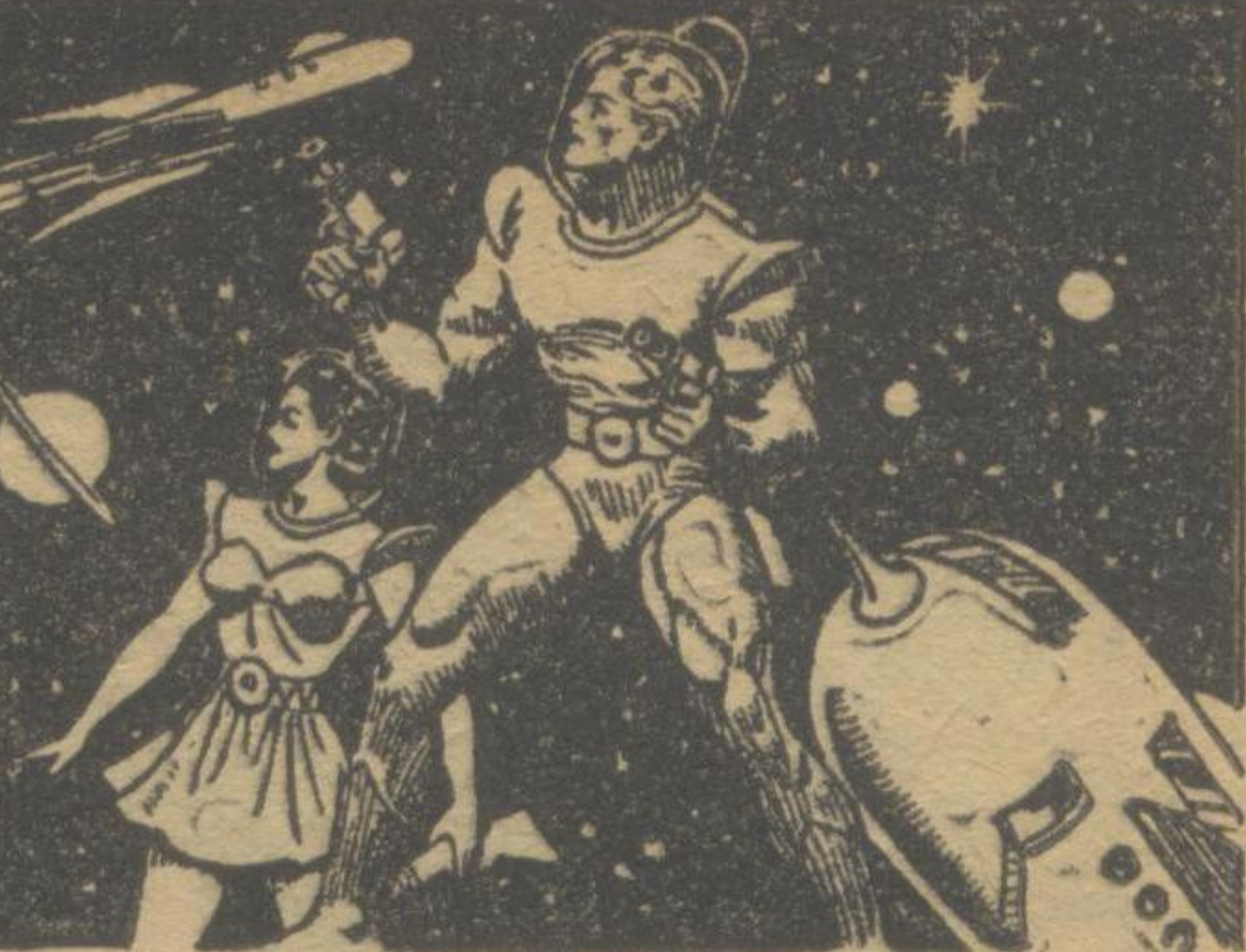
**THE BRAIN
SINNER**



CAGE OF A THOUSAND WINGS

the stars — novel by ALGIS BUDRYS

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 10

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

SPRING, 1955

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HAGERTY'S ENZYMES

By A. L. HALEY

There's a place for every man and a man for every place, but on robot-harried Mars the situation was just a little different.

HARPER BREEN sank down gingerly into the new Relaxo-Lounge. He placed twitching bands on the armrests and laid his head back stiffly. He closed his fluttering eyelids and clamped his mouth to keep the corner from jumping.

"Just lie back, Harp," droned his sister soothingly. "Just give in and let go of everything."

Harper tried to let go of everything. He gave in to the chair. And gently the chair went to work. It rocked rhythmically, it vibrated tenderly. With velvety cushions it massaged his back and arms and legs.

For all of five minutes Harper stood it. Then with a frenzied lunge he escaped the embrace of the Relaxo-Lounge and fled to a gloriously stationary sofa.

"Harp!" His sister, Bella, was ready to weep with exasperation. "Dr. Franz said it would be just the thing for you! Why won't you give it a trial?"

Harper glared at the preposterous chair. "Franz!" he snarled. "That prize fathead! I've paid him a fortune in fees. I haven't slept for weeks. I can't eat anything but soup. My nerves are jangling like a four-alarm fire. And what does he prescribe? A blasted jiggling baby carriage! Why, I ought to send him the bill for it!" Completely outraged, he lay back on the couch and closed his eyes.

"Now, Harp, you know you've never obeyed his orders. He told you last year that you'd have to ease up. Why do you have to try to run the whole world? It's the strain of all your business worries that's causing your trouble. He told you to take a long vacation or you'd crack up. Don't blame him for your own stubbornness."

Harper snorted. His large nose developed

the sound magnificently. "Vacation!" he snorted. "Batting a silly ball around or dragging a hook after a stupid fish! Fine activities for an intelligent middle-aged man! And let me correct you. It isn't business worries that are driving me to a crack-up. It's the strain of trying to get some sensible, reasonable coöperation from the nincompoops I have to hire! It's the idiocy of the human race that's got me whipped! It's the—"

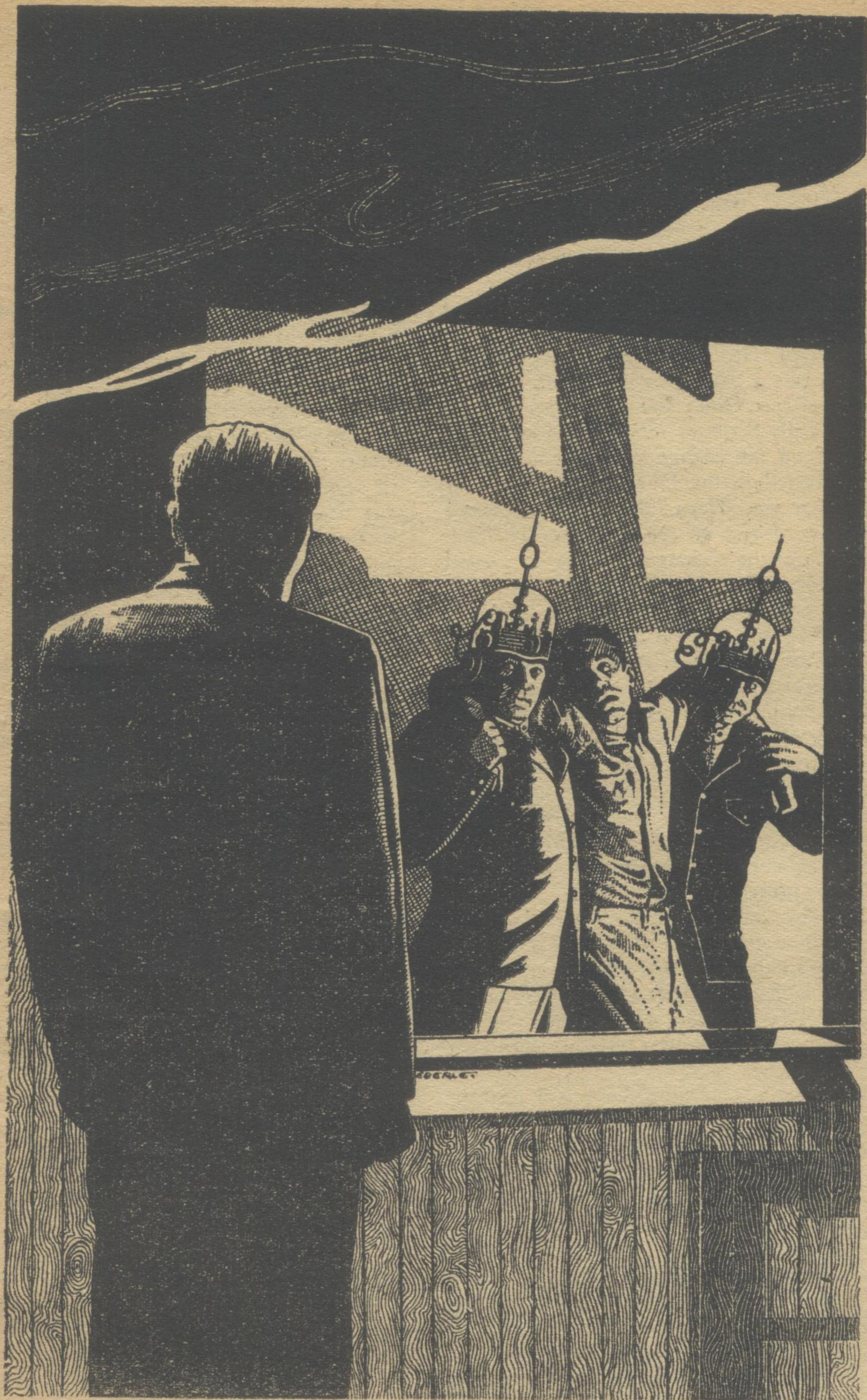
"Hey, Harp, old man!" His brother-in-law, turning the pages of the new colorama magazine, INTERPLANETARY, had paused at a double-spread. "Didn't you have a finger in those Martian equatorial wells they sunk twenty years ago?"

Harper's hands twitched violently. "Don't mention that fiasco!" he rasped. "That deal nearly cost me my shirt! Water, hell! Those wells spewed up the craziest conglomeration of liquids ever tapped!"

SCRIBNEY, whose large, phlegmatic person and calm professorial brain were the complete antithesis of Harper's picked-crow physique and scheming financier's wits, looked severely over his glasses. Harp's nervous tribulations were beginning to bore him, as well as interfere with the harmony of his home.

"You're away behind the times, Harp," he declared. "Don't you know that those have proved to be the most astoundingly curative springs ever discovered anywhere? Don't you know that a syndicate has built the largest extra-terrestrial hotel of the solar system there and that people are flocking to it to get cured of whatever ails 'em? Old man, you missed a bet!"

Leaping from the sofa, Harper rudely



snatched the magazine from Scribney's hands. He glared at the spread which depicted a star-shaped structure of bottle-green glass resting jewel-like on the rufous rock of Mars. The main portion of the building consisted of a circular skyscraper with a glass-domed roof. Between its star-shaped annexes, other domes covered landscaped gardens and noxious pools which in the drawing looked lovely and enticing.

"Why, I remember now!" exclaimed Bella. "That's where the Durants went two years ago! He was about dead and she looked like a hag. They came back in wonderful shape. Don't you remember, Scrib?"

Dutifully Scribney remembered and commented on the change the Martian springs had effected in the Durants. "It's the very thing for you, Harp," he advised. "You'd get a good rest on the way out. This gas they use in the rockets nowadays is as good as a rest-cure; it sort of floats you along the time-track in a pleasant daze, they tell me. And you can finish the cure at the hotel while looking it over. And not only that." Confidentially he leaned toward his insignificant looking brother-in-law. "The chemists over at Dade McCann have just isolated an enzyme from one species of Martian fungus that breaks down crude oil into its components without the need for chemical processing. There's a fortune waiting for the man who corners that fungus market and learns to process the stuff!"

Scribney had gauged his victim's mental processes accurately. The magazine sagged in Harp's hands, and his sharp eyes became shrewd and calculating. He even forgot to twitch. "Maybe you're right, Scrib," he acknowledged. "Combine a rest-cure with business, eh?"

Raising the magazine, he began reading the advertisement. And that was when he saw the line about the robots. "—the only hotel staffed entirely with robot servants—"

"Robots!" he shrilled. "You mean they've developed the things to that point? Why hasn't somebody told me? I'll have Jackson's hide! I'll disfranchise him! I'll—"

"Harp!" exploded Bella. "Stop it! Maybe Jackson doesn't know a thing about it, whatever it is! If it's something at the Emerald Star Hotel, why don't you just go and find out for yourself instead of throw-

ing a tantrum? That's the only sensible way!"

"You're right, Bella," agreed Harper incisively. "I'll go and find out for myself. Immediately!" Scooping up his hat, he left at his usual lope.

"Well!" remarked his sister. "All I can say is that they'd better turn that happy-gas on extra strong for Harp's trip out!"

THE trip out did Harper a world of good. Under the influence of the soporific gas that permeated the rocket, he really relaxed for the first time in years, sinking with the other passengers into a hazy lethargy with little sense of passing time and almost no memory of the interval.

It seemed hardly more than a handful of hours until they were strapping themselves into deceleration hammocks for the landing. And then Harper was waking with lassitude still heavy in his veins. He struggled out of the hammock, made his way to the airlock, and found himself whisked by pneumatic tube directly into the lobby of the Emerald Star Hotel.

Appreciatively he gazed around at the half-acre of moss-gray carpeting, green-tinted by the light sifting through the walls of Martian copper-glass, and at the vistas of beautiful domed gardens framed by a dozen arches. But most of all, the robots won his delighted approval.

He could see at once that they had been developed to an amazingly high state of perfection. How, he wondered again, had this been done without his knowledge? Was Scrib right? Was he slipping? Gnawing at the doubt, he watched the robots moving efficiently about, pushing patients in wheelchairs, carrying trays, guiding newcomers, performing janitorial duties tirelessly, promptly, and best of all, silently.

Harper was enthralled. He'd staff his offices with them. Hang the expense! There'd be no more of that obnoxious personal friction and proneness to error that was always deviling the most carefully trained office staffs! He'd investigate and find out the exact potentialities of these robots while here, and then go home and introduce them into the field of business. He'd show them whether he was slipping! Briskly he went over to the desk.

He was immediately confronted with a sample of that human obstinacy that was slowly driving him mad. Machines, he sighed to himself. Wonderful silent machines! For a woman was arguing stridently with the desk clerk who, poor man, was a high strung fellow human instead of a robot. Harper watched him shrinking and turning pale lavender in the stress of the argument.

"A nurse!" shouted the woman. "I want a nurse! A real woman! For what you charge, you should be able to give me a television star if I want one! I won't have another of those damnable robots in my room, do you hear?"

No one within the confines of the huge lobby could have helped hearing. The clerk flinched visibly. "Now, Mrs. Jacobsen," he soothed. "You know the hotel is staffed entirely with robots. They're much more expensive, really, than human employees, but so much more efficient, you know. Admit it, they give excellent service, don't they, now?" Toothily he smiled at the enraged woman.

"That's just it!" Mrs. Jacobsen glared. "The service is *too* good. I might just as well have a set of push buttons in the room. I want someone to *hear* what I say! I want to be able to change my mind once in awhile!"

Harper snorted. "Wants someone she can devil," he diagnosed. "Someone she can get a kick out of ordering around." With vast contempt he stepped to the desk beside her and peremptorily rapped for the clerk.

"One moment, sir," begged that harassed individual. "Just one moment, please." He turned back to the woman.

But she had turned her glare on Harper. "You could at least be civil enough to wait your turn!"

Harper smirked. "My good woman, I'm not a robot. Robots, of course, are always civil. But you should know by now that civility isn't a normal human trait." Leaving her temporarily quashed, he beckoned authoritatively to the clerk.

"I've just arrived and want to get settled. I'm here merely for a rest-cure, no treatments. You can assign my quarters before continuing your—ah—discussion with the lady."

The clerk sputtered. Mrs. Jacobsen sputtered. But not for nothing was Harper one of the leading business executives of the earth. Harper's implacable stare won his point. Wiping beads of moisture from his forehead, the clerk fumbled for a card, typed it out, and was about to deposit it in the punch box when a fist hit the desk a resounding blow and another voice, male, roared out at Harper's elbow.

"This is a helluva joint!" roared the voice. "Man could rot away to the knees while he's waitin' for accommodations. Service!" Again his fist banged the counter.

The clerk jumped. He dropped Harper's card and had to stoop for it. Absently holding it, he straightened up to face Mrs. Jacobsen and the irate newcomer. Hastily he pushed a tagged key at Harper.

"Here you are, Mr. Breen. I'm sure you'll find it comfortable." With a pallid smile he pressed a button and consigned Harper to the care of a silent and efficient robot.

THE room was more than comfortable. It was beautiful. Its bank of clear windows set in the green glass wall framed startling rubicund views of the Martian hinterland where, Harper affectionately thought, fungi were busy producing enzymes that were going to be worth millions for him and his associates. There remained only the small detail of discovering how to extract them economically and to process them on this more than arid and almost airless planet. Details for his bright young laboratory men; mere details. . . .

Leaving his luggage to be unpacked by the robot attendant, he went up to the domed roof restaurant. Lunching boldly on broiled halibut with consomme, salad and a bland custard, he stared out at the dark blue sky of Mars, with Deimos hanging in the east in three-quarter phase while Phobos raced up from the west like a meteor behind schedule. Leaning back in his cushioned chair, he even more boldly lit a slim cigar—his first in months—and inhaled happily. For once old Scribney had certainly been right, he reflected. Yes sir, Scrib had rung the bell, and he wasn't the man to forget it. With a wonderful sense of well-

being he returned to his room and prepared to relax.

Harper opened his eyes. Two robots were bending over him. He saw that they were dressed in white, like hospital attendants. But he had no further opportunity to examine them. With brisk, well-co-ordinated movements they wheeled a stretcher alongside his couch, stuck a hypo into his arm, bundled him onto the stretcher and started wheeling him out.

Harper's tongue finally functioned. "What's all this?" he demanded. "There's nothing wrong with me. Let me go!"

He struggled to rise, but a metal hand pushed him firmly on the chest. Inexorably it pushed him flat.

"You've got the wrong room!" yelled Harp. "Let me go!" But the hypo began to take effect. His yells became weaker and drowsier. Hazily, as he drifted off, he thought of Mrs. Jacobsen. Maybe she had something, at that.

THERE was a tentative knock on the door. "Come in," called Harper bleakly. As soon as the door opened he regretted his invitation, for the opening framed the large untidy man who had noisily pounded on the desk demanding service while he, Harp, was being registered.

"Say, pardner," he said hoarsely, "you haven't seen any of them robots around here, have you?"

Harper scowled. "Oh, haven't I?" he grated. "Robots! Do you know what they did to me." Indignation lit fires in his pale eyes. "Came in here while I was lying down peacefully digesting the first meal I've enjoyed in months, dragged me off to the surgery, and pumped it all out! The only meal I've enjoyed in months!" Blackly he sank his chin onto his fist and contemplated the outrage.

"Why didn't you stop 'em?" reasonably asked the visitor.

"Stop a robot?" Harper glared pityingly. "How? You can't reason with the blasted things. And as for using force—it's man against metal. You try it!" He ground his teeth together in futile rage. "And to think I had the insane notion that robots were the last word! Why, I was ready to staff my offices with the things!"

The big man placed his large hands on his own capacious stomach and groaned. "I'm sure sorry it was you and not me, pardner. I could use some of that treatment right now. Musta been that steak and onions I ate after all that tundra dope I've been livin' on."

"Tundra?" A faint spark of alertness lightened Harper's dull rage. "You mean you work out here on the tundra?"

"That's right. How'd you think I got in such a helluva shape? I'm superintendent of one of the fungus plants. I'm Jake Ellis of Hagerty's Enzymes. There's good money in it, but man, what a job! No air worth mentionin'. Temperature always freezin' or below. Pressure suits. Huts. Factory. Processed food. Nothin' else. Just nothin'. That's where they could use some robots. It sure ain't no job for a real live man. And in fact, there ain't many men left there. If old man Hagerty only knew it, he's about out of business."

Harper sat up as if he'd been needled. He opened his mouth to speak. But just then the door opened briskly and two robots entered. With a horrified stare, Harper clutched his maltreated stomach. He saw a third robot enter, wheeling a chair.

"A wheel chair!" squeaked the victim. "I tell you, there's nothing wrong with me! Take it away! I'm only here for a rest-cure! Believe me! Take it away!"

The robots ignored him. For the first time in his spectacular and ruthless career Harper was up against creatures that he could neither bribe, persuade nor browbeat, inveigle nor ignore. It shattered his ebbing self-confidence. He began waving his hands helplessly.

The robots not only ignored Harper. They paid no attention at all to Jake Ellis, who was plucking at their metallic arms pleading, "Take me, boys. I need the treatment bad, whatever it is. I need all the treatment I can get. Take me! I'm just a wreck, fellers—"

Stolidly they picked Harper up, plunked him into the chair, strapped him down and marched out with him.

Dejectedly Ellis returned to his own room. Again he lifted the receiver of the room phone; but as usual a robot voice answered sweetly, mechanically, and mean-

inglessly. He hung up and went miserably to bed.

THERE was something nagging at Harper's mind. Something he should do. Something that concerned robots. But he was too exhausted to think it out.

For five days now his pet robots had put him through an ordeal that made him flinch every time he thought about it. Which wasn't often, since he was almost past thinking. They plunked him into stinking mud-baths and held him there until he was well-done to the bone, he was sure. They soaked him in foul, steaming irradiated waters until he gagged. They brought him wierd concoctions to eat and drink and then stood over him until he consumed them. They purged and massaged and exercised him.

Whenever they let him alone, he simply collapsed into bed and slept. There was nothing else to do anyway. They'd taken his clothes; and the phone, after an announcement that he would have no more service for two weeks, gave him nothing but a busy signal.

"Persecution, that's what it is!" he moaned desperately. And he turned his back to the mirror, which showed him that he was beginning to look flesh-colored instead of the parchment yellow to which he had become accustomed. He closed his mind to the fact that he was sleeping for hours on end like the proverbial baby, and that he was getting such an appetite that he could almost relish even that detestable mush they sent him for breakfast. He was determined to be furious. As soon as he could wake up enough to be.

He hadn't been awake long this time before Jake Ellis was there again, still moaning about his lack of treatments. "Nothin' yet," he gloomily informed Harp. "They haven't been near me. I just can't understand it. After I signed up for the works and paid 'em in advance! And I can't find any way out of this section. The other two rooms are empty and the elevator hasn't got any button. The robots just have to come and get a man or he's stuck."

"Stuck!" snarled Harp. "I'm never stuck!" And I'm damned if I'll wait any longer to break out of this—this jail! Listen,

Jake. I've been thinking. Or trying to, with what's left of me. You came in just when that assinine clerk was registering me. I'll bet that clerk got rattled and gave me the wrong key. I'll bet you're supposed to have this room and I'm getting your treatments. Why don't we switch rooms and see what happens?"

"Say, maybe you're right!" Jake's eyes gleamed at last with hope. "I'll get my clothes."

Harp's eyebrows rose. "You mean they left you your clothes?"

"Why, sure. You mean they took yours?"

Harp nodded. An idea began to formulate. "Leave your things, will you? I'm desperate! I'm going to see the manager of this madhouse if I have to go down dressed in a sheet. Your clothes would be better than that."

Jake, looking over Harper's skimpy frame, grunted doubtfully. "Maybe you could tie 'em on so they wouldn't slip. And roll up the cuffs. It's okay with me, but just don't lose something when you're down there in that fancy lobby."

Harper looked at his watch. "Time to go. Relax, old man. The robots will be along any minute now. If you're the only man in the room, I'm sure they'll take you. They aren't equipped to figure it out. And don't worry about me. I'll anchor your duds all right."

Harper had guessed right. Gleefully from the doorway of his new room he watched the robots wheel away his equally delighted neighbor for his first treatment. Then he closed the door and began to don Jake's clothing.

The result was unique. He looked like a small boy in his father's clothes, except for the remarkably aged and gnome-like head sticking up on a skinny neck from a collar three sizes too big. And he was shoeless. He was completely unable to navigate in Jake's number twelves. But Harper was a determined man. He didn't even flinch from his image in the mirror. Firmly he stepped over to Jake's telephone. "This is room 618," he said authoritatively. "Send up the elevator for me. I want to go down to the lobby."

He'd guessed right again. "It will be right up, sir," responded the robot operator.

Hopefully he stepped out into the hall and shuffled to the elevator.

ONLY the robots were immune to Harper Breen's progress across the huge suave lobby.

He was a blot on its rich beauty, a grotesque enigma that rooted the other visitors into paralyzed staring groups. Stepping out of the elevator, he had laid a course for the desk which loomed like an island in a moss-gray lake, and now he strode manfully toward it, ignoring the oversize trousers slapping around his stocking feet. Only the robots shared his self control.

The clerk was the first to recover from the collective stupor. Frantically he pushed the button that would summon the robot guard. With a gasp of relief he saw the two massive manlike machines moving inexorably forward. He pointed to Harper. "Get that patient!" he ordered. "Take him to the—to the mudbaths!"

"No you don't!" yelled Harper. "I want to see the manager!" Nimbly he circled the guard and leaped behind the desk. He began to throw things at the robots. Things like inkwells and typewriters and card indexes. Especially, card indexes.

"Stop it!" begged the clerk. "You'll wreck the system! We'll never get it straight again! Stop it!"

"Call them off!" snarled Harper. "Call them off or I'll ruin your switchboard!" He put a shoulder against it and prepared to heave.

With one last appalled glare at the madman, the clerk picked up an electric finger and pointed it at the approaching robots. They became oddly inanimate.

"That's better!" Harper straightened up and meticulously smoothed the collar of his flapping coat. "Now—the manager, please."

"This—this way, sir." With shrinking steps the clerk led Harper across the width of the lobby among the fascinated guests. He was beyond speech. Opening the inconspicuous door, he waved Harper inside and returned doggedly to his desk, where he began to pick up things and at the same time phrase his resignation in his mind.

Brushing aside the startled secretary in the outer cubicle, Harper flapped and shuffled straight into the inner sanctum. The

manager, who was busy chewing a cigar to shreds behind his fortress of gun metal desk, jerked hastily upright and glared at the intruder. "My good man—" he began.

"Don't 'my-good-man' me!" snapped Harper. He glared back at the manager. Reaching as far across the expanse of desk-top as he could stretch, he shook his puny fist. "Do you know who I am? I'm Harper S. Breen, of Breen and Helgart, Incorporated! And do you know why I haven't even a card to prove it? Do you know why I have to make my way downstairs in garb that makes a laughing stock of me? Do you know why? Because that assinine clerk of yours put me in the wrong room and those damnable robots of yours then proceeded to make a prisoner of me! Me, Harper S. Breen! Why, I'll sue you until you'll be lucky if you have a sheet of writing-paper left in this idiot's retreat!"

Hayes, the manager, blanched. Then he began to mottle in an apoplectic pattern. And suddenly with a gusty sigh, he collapsed into his chair. With a shaking hand he mopped his forehead. "My robots!" he muttered. "As if I invented the damned things!"

Despondently he looked at Harper. "Go ahead and sue, Mr. Breen. If you don't, somebody else will. And if nobody sues, we'll go broke anyway, at the rate our guest list is declining. I'm ready to hand in my resignation."

Again he sighed. "The trouble," he explained, "is that those fool robots are completely logical, and people aren't. There's no way to mix the two. It's dynamite. Maybe people can gradually learn to live with robots, but they haven't yet. Only we had to find it out the hard way. We—" he grimaced disgustedly—"had to pioneer in the use of robots. And it cost us so much that we can't afford to reconvert to human help. So—Operation Robot is about to bankrupt the syndicate."

Listening, an amazing calm settled on Harper. Thoughtfully now he hooked a chair to the desk with his stockinged foot, sat down and reached for the cigar that Hayes automatically offered him. "Oh, I don't know," he said mildly.

Hayes leaned forward like a drowning man sighting a liferaft. "What do you

mean, you don't know? You're threatening to take our shirts, aren't you?"

Meticulously Harper clipped and lit his cigar. "It seems to me that these robots might be useful in quite another capacity. I might even make a deal with your syndicate to take them off your hands—at a reasonable price, of course—and forget the outrages I've suffered at your establishment."

Hayes leaned toward him incredulous. "You mean you want these robots after what you've seen and experienced?"

Placidly Harper puffed a smoke ring. "Of course, you'd have to take into consideration that it would be an experiment for me, too. And there's the suit I'm clearly justified in instituting. However, I'm willing to discuss the matter with your superiors."

With hope burgeoning for the first time in weeks, Hayes lifted his head. "My dear Mr. Breen, to get rid of these pestiferous robots, I'll back you to the hilt! I'll notify the owners at once. At once, Mr. Breen! And while we wait for them, allow me to put you up as a guest of the hotel." Coming around to Harper, he effusively shook Harp's scrawny hand, and then personally escorted him not merely to the door but across the lobby to the elevator.

Harper gazed out at the stunned audience. This was more like the treatment he was accustomed to! Haughtily he squared his bony shoulders inside the immense jacket and stepped into the elevator. He was ready for the second step of his private Operation Robot.

BACK on Earth it was a warm, misty spring day—the kind of day unknown to the planet Mars. Bella and Scribney, superb in new spring outfits, waited restlessly while the rocket cooled and the passengers recovered from deceleration.

"Look, Scrib!" Bella clutched Scribney's substantial arm. "It's finally opening."

They watched the airlock open and the platform wheel into place. They watched the passengers descend, looking a trifle dazed.

"There he is!" cried Bella. "Why, doesn't he look wonderful! Scrib, it's amazing! Look at him!"

And indeed, Harper was stepping briskly downward, looking spry and fit and years younger. He came across to them actually beaming. It was the first pleasant expression they had seen on his face in years.

"Well, you old dog!" exclaimed Scribney affectionately. "So you did it again!"

Harper smirked. "Yep, I turned a neat little deal. I bought out Hagerty's Enzymes and staffed the plant with the hotel's robots. Got both of 'em dirt cheap. Both concerns going bankrupt because they didn't have sense enough to swap their workers. Feel I owe you a bit for that tip about enzymes, Scrib, so I made out a block of stock to you. All right?"

"All right?" Scribney gulped. Why, the dried-up little turnip was human after all. "All right! Yes, sir! But aren't you going to use some of those robots for office help? Aren't they efficient and all that?"

Harper's smile vanished. "Don't even mention such a thing!" he yelped. "You don't know what you're saying! I lived with those things for weeks. I wouldn't have one around! Keep 'em in the factory where they belong!"

He glimpsed the composed, wonderfully human face of his secretary, waiting patiently in the background. "Oh there you are, Smythe." He turned to his relatives. "Busy day ahead. See you later, folks—"

"Same old Harp," observed Scribney. Then he thought of the block of stock. "What say we celebrate our rise to a position in the syndicate, honey?"

"Wonderful!" She squeezed his arm, and smiling at each other, they left the port.